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## THE VOYAGES TO VINLAND THE GOOD

The problem of the voyages of the Northmen to Vinland has long been of interest to historians. Did the Northmen actually discover the shores of America at the close of the tenth century, and, if they did, was the discovery of any importance for the later history of the western world? To the first part of this question nearly all who have examined the evidence are willing to give an affirmative answer; to the second part the replies have generally been in the negative. But while historians are willing to grant the bare fact of the discovery, they are not agreed as to what extent we are to credit the detailed accounts of the voyages that have come down to us from the Icelandic sources. This part of the problem has produced a literature of some proportions, and the end is not yet.

The modern accounts of the Norse voyages to Vinland may be said to begin with a map of the world drawn by Sigurdr Stefansson about 1590. Though America had now been known to western Europe for about a century, the news of the Columbian discoveries had apparently not penetrated to Iceland, for the geographer seems to have derived all his knowledge of the western continent from the sagas of his own island, particularly the Saga of Eric the Red. A hundred years later Thormodus Torfæus wrote a history of the Vinland voyages,<sup>1</sup> which was based on the Greenland Tale in the Flat-isle Book as well as on the Eric-saga. The next important contribution came in 1837, when C. C. Rafn published his work on the Northmen in the New World.<sup>2</sup> Neither Torfæus nor Rafn was a critical historian; consequently, neither made any serious attempt to sift the evidence that he presented.

The first scholar who subjected the Vinland narratives to searching criticism was Professor Gustav Storm, who published a series of articles on the voyages from Iceland to the southwest in *Historisk Tidsskrift* in the years 1886-1892. Storm concluded that of the two narratives that contained in the Saga of Eric the Red alone could lay serious claim to authenticity. The story in the Flat-isle Book he found to be confused in chronology and unreliable in

<sup>1</sup> *Historia Vinlandiæ Antiquæ*. Copenhagen, 1705.

<sup>2</sup> *Antiquitates Americanæ*. Copenhagen, 1837.

details. Storm also concluded that, so far as we can determine from the Icelandic sources, the Northmen never reached a point farther south than Nova Scotia.

The narratives were once more given a critical examination in 1911 when Dr. Fridtjof Nansen published his great work *In Northern Mists*.<sup>3</sup> While Dr. Nansen accepts the fact of a Norse discovery of America, he rejects all the accounts of the voyages that have come down to us. The saga narratives he believes to have grown out of the Classical myths of the Isles of the Blessed, which probably reached the Norsemen through Irish sources. On the Isles of the Blessed the grape was said to flourish and self-sown wheat grew in abundance; the same is told of the Vinland of the sagas. Scandinavian scholars refused to accept Dr. Nansen's conclusions as final; they held that the Eric-saga at least could be regarded as a reliable source. Nevertheless, the argument of the great explorer was a source of much embarrassment to those who still held to the stories of Leif and Karlsefni.

But now comes Professor William Hovgaard with a new study of the Vinland problems,<sup>4</sup> in which the conclusions of both Storm and Nansen are rejected and the narratives of the Flat-isle Book as well as that of the Eric-saga are calmly replaced on the shelf of reliable historical literature.

Professor Hovgaard is a Dane by birth and was at one time commander in the Danish navy. At present he is professor of naval design in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was attracted to the subject of the Norse discoveries not only by a natural interest in the Scandinavian past, but also by a professional interest in the problems of tenth century navigation. It was his original intention to limit his study to "navigation and allied matters"; but he soon found that one problem necessitated the study of another, "and the pamphlet grew to a book".

The study is published by the American-Scandinavian Foundation as the first of a series of projected monographs on Scandinavian subjects. It is beautifully printed, bound in the best of taste, is profusely illustrated with useful and suggestive pictures and maps, and makes a very attractive volume.

After a brief introduction in which the author deals with the problem in its more general aspects, he proceeds to a discussion of life in Iceland and Greenland in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

<sup>3</sup> New York, 1911.

<sup>4</sup> *The Voyages of the Norsemen to America*. New York, 1914.

This is followed by two chapters devoted to the ships and ship-building of the Viking age. An important problem in this connection is the question of speed, which Professor Hovgaard works out in a convincing manner. In chapter v, "The accounts of the Vinland voyages", he gives the substance of the narratives on which the study is based. The following two chapters are devoted to a critical examination of these sources with a view to establishing their credibility; of particular interest is the discussion of the Flat-isle Book. Chapters viii, ix, and x deal with "Vinland and its attributes", its products, inhabitants, and the nature of its shores. In the closing two chapters the voyages are analyzed from the viewpoint of geography and reconstructed in the light of the conclusions reached in the earlier chapters.

It will not be possible to discuss or even to state all the interesting conclusions that Professor Hovgaard has reached in the process of his study. It is true that many of them are tentative only; some are mere conjectures or suggestions and will probably not be generally accepted; but on some subjects the author feels that he is on firm ground. The problem whether the "blond" Eskimos that have recently been discovered by V. Stefansson are in part descendants of Norwegian colonists in Greenland we shall have to leave to the ethnologist. The question of the relative historical merits of the Eric-saga and the Flat-isle Book is also one that calls for further study, but may never be answered to the satisfaction of all critics. Professor Hovgaard believes that both can be trusted on most points, but that both also contain elements of fiction. He concludes that the narrative in both accounts has become confused with the passage of time, but that by a careful sifting of details a consistent narrative can be constructed from the two stories. Of great interest is his construction of the Vinland map. He believes that the Norsemen knew the American coast as far south as the Cape Cod region. They named three great regions (Helluland, the land of flat rocks, Markland, the land of woods, and Vinland, the land of the grape) and several local points, such as bays and headlands. It is quit clear, however, that the regions visited by Karlsefni are not the same as those visited and named by Leif Ericsson (if Leif actually did name them). Professor Hovgaard accounts for this disagreement in a very plausible manner. The later voyagers were mistaken in their beliefs that they had reached the points that Leif had named; or the scribes who constructed the

sagas have confused the narratives that tradition had handed down. He conjectures that Leif's Helluland, Markland, and Vinland were certain islands southwest of Greenland, Nova Scotia, and the Cape Cod region respectively; while the story of Karlsefni's voyage gives the same names to the northeast coast of Labrador, some point halfway down the east coast of Labrador, and the upper part of Newfoundland. These conclusions he reaches from a comparison of the descriptions given in the sagas with modern descriptions of physical conditions along the north Atlantic coast.

Enough has been given to show that Professor Hovgaard's study is a work of positive merit. It offers a solution for every difficulty that has been encountered in earlier efforts to construct a satisfactory account of the Vinland voyages from the saga materials. However, we have still the right to ask whether these solutions are likely to be accepted as final. The reviewer has followed the development of the author's hypotheses with great interest; but the reading has not resulted in absolute conviction. The work gives the appearance of thorough research; still, it leaves something to be desired. It seems strange that Professor Hovgaard should have overlooked so important a work as Olson and Bourne, *The Northmen, Columbus, and Cabot*,<sup>5</sup> which contains a careful edition of the principal Icelandic sources prepared by Professor Julius E. Olson of the University of Wisconsin. As this edition is the one that is most likely to be used by American students, it should at least have had a place in the bibliography.

The least convincing part of Professor Hovgaard's work is his argument in favor of the credibility of the Greenland Tale in the Flat-isle Book. His hypotheses are to such a large extent based on this document that unless the Flat-isle Book be accepted as a reliable source, they cannot stand. It will be admitted that the author has done much to weaken the force of Professor Storm's objections, but they do not seem to have been entirely removed. It is, of course, possible that future investigations of Norwegian chronology will show that these objections were not well founded.

Since the Vinland story is a field into which conjecture has entered very largely, the reviewer trusts that he may be permitted to make an excursion into the same field. It seems quite evident

<sup>5</sup> *Original Narratives of Early American History*. Edited by J. Franklin Jameson. Vol. I, New York, 1906.

that the Norse navigators actually did visit and to some extent explore the coast of North America about the year 1000. In the Old Northern sources (including the *Descriptio* of Adam of Bremen) there are at least a dozen allusions to Vinland and Markland and to men who had visited or sought Vinland; in addition there are the two extensive narratives of the Eric-saga and the Greenland Tale. Many of these no doubt go back to some common earlier source; but that cannot be true of all. It also seems clear that Leif or some other voyager must have sailed far enough south to reach a point that lay well within the field of the wild grape. The new name Vinland doubtless suggested to the minds of the time that there was some connection between this region and the Isles of the Blessed; if Vinland possessed the grape, no doubt it also produced the self-sown wheat, and the tradition was modified accordingly. This new detail must have entered into the account at a very early date, for Adam of Bremen, who wrote about 1070 only two generations after the discovery, makes mention of both these interesting products.

The Vinland tradition must have persisted in Iceland to the close of the middle ages. The Flat-isle Book was compiled only a century before the voyage of Columbus to the West Indies. Was the rumor of the exploits of Leif and Karlsefni also current in Europe in the fifteenth century? This is an interesting question, though one that will probably never find an answer. But if such a rumor were abroad, it would doubtless be important as a stimulus to the growing geographical curiosity of the Renaissance. We are told that Columbus claimed that in 1477 he had made a journey into the neighborhood of Iceland; it is not likely that this expedition into the Arctic was ever made; but why should the great discoverer have displayed any interest whatever in this island of mystery, unless it were in some way associated in his mind with the great project that he wished to undertake? It would also be interesting to know whether the writings of Adam of Bremen had very generally found their way into the libraries of Europe; if they had, all who wished might read that the Danish king "Spoke of an island in that ocean discovered by many which is called Vinland, for the reason that vines grow wild there, which yield the best of wine".

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